

SANITARY COMMISSION,

No. 49.

NOTE.

The attention of the Sanitary Commission has been, for several months past, directed to the subject of a timely provision for the soldiers disabled in the war, after peace shall be restored. The question is full of difficulties. Very little information or guidance is to be obtained from books. The Commission, learning that S. G. Perkins, Esq., of Boston, was about visiting Europe, and being acquainted with his interest in similar questions, resolved to avail itself, if possible, of his talents and opportunities, to collect information by personal visits to all the chief Military Hospitals in Europe. Mr. Perkins accepted the appointment, and sailed a month ago for France, where his investigations will commence. The letter of the President to Mr. Perkins, is printed, simply to draw the attention of fore-looking men to the subject. It will be sent only to such gentlemen as are supposed to be interested in the matter; and they are earnestly requested to communicate, by letter, any suggestions in regard to the question, in any of its departments, to the President of the Sanitary Commission, at 498 Broadway, New York.

October 13th, 1862.

NEW YORK, August 15th, 1862.

STEPHEN G. PERKINS, Esq.:

Dear Sir,—The Sanitary Commission are much exercised with the subject of the future of the disabled soldiers of this war. They calculate that, if it continue a year longer, not less than a hundred thousand men, of impaired vigor, maimed, or broken in body and spirit, will be thrown on the country. Add to this a tide of another hundred thousand men, demoralized for civil life by military habits, and it is easy to see what a

trial to the order, industry, and security of society, and what a burden to its already strained resources, there is in store for us. It is, in our judgment, to the last degree important, to begin now, to create a public opinion which shall conduce to, or compel the adoption of, the wisest policy on the part of our municipal and town governments, in respect of disabled soldiers—so as to discourage all favor to mendicity—all allowance to any exceptional license to those who have been soldiers—all disposition for invalids to throw themselves, any further than is necessary, on the support and protection of society. You, who have paid so much attention to social science, know how easily loose, indulgent, and destructive notions creep into communities, under the name and purpose of humanity, and what temptations of a sentimental kind there will be, to favor a policy which will undermine self-respect, selfsupport, and the true American pride of personal independence.

In view of this, the Sanitary Commission is now studying the general subject of the proper method of dealing with our disabled soldiers at the close of the war, and, as far as possible, prior to that. The few guiding principles thus far excogitated, appear to be these :

1. As little outside interference with natural laws and self-help as possible.

2. As much moral and other encouragement and strengthening of the natural reliances as possible.

3. The utmost endeavor to promote the healthy absorption of the invalid class into the homes, and into the ordinary industry of the country.

In opposition to these principles will be the rivalry and com-

petition of States, in generosity to disabled soldiers—similar to that which has appeared in running bounties to recruits up to an excessive and injurious height; the attempt to make political capital out of the sympathy of the public with the invalids of the war—issuing in over-legislation and over action—with much bad and demoralizing sentimentality—and, worst of all, a public disposition to treat this whole class as a class with a right to be idle, or to beg, or to claim exemption from the ordinary rules of life.

To illustrate what I mean by interference with natural laws, I should regard any general scheme for herding the invalids of the war into State or National Institutions, as a most dangerous blow to domestic order, to the sacredness of home affections and responsibilities, as well as a weakening of what may be termed the law of local sympathy. Their natural kindred are the first protectors of our invalids; the local community, the next; and the State the last. We must exhaust the two first before drawing on the last; or, rather, we must cherish and sustain the two first by every possible means before resorting to the last, which in the end will require to be heavily drawn upon. This is not a matter of mere pecuniary consideration. It is not to save the State or National Treasury, but to encourage and save the spirit of independence, to preserve the self-respect, and the homely graces and virtues of the People, on which all the real dignity and strength of the Nation rest.

To accomplish this result—i. e., to restore the large proportion of all our invalids to their homes, there to live and labor according to their strength, sustained and blessed by their own kindred—we must have a sound, a generous, a wisely considered pension law; and this pension law must be rid of all humiliating or enslaving character. It must be considered as the payment of what has been earned, and its payment should be made regular, punctual, immediate, and with as little loss by agen-

cies and obstructions as possible. Moreover, the right to a pension should not rest exclusively on visible wounds. Broken constitutions, or impaired vigor, traceable unmistakably to military service, should entitle to a pension.

To employ to the utmost the law of local sympathy, the disabled and invalid soldiers should be encouraged in every way to settle in the neighborhoods from which they came, and be thrown as much as possible on the fraternal responsibility of their neighbors for employment and sympathetic aid. A sense of local or communal responsibility to leave the light employments in every village or hamlet to these invalids, should be cherished. The emulations of towns could be depended upon for this, were a proper start given to it by a judicious amount of writing on the subject in the leading journals. In London, by some recent law, one-legged or one-armed men have some special privileges, as ticket-takers, parcel-bearers, messengers, &c. (I hope you will find out, when abroad, precisely what it is.) I am confident that if we begin right we can induce a most extensive and most wholesome re-absorption of the invalids of the war into the civil life of the nation, to the actual advantage of its affections, its patriotism, and its honest pride. But the subject will need careful guidance.

After every thing has been done to discover and appropriate all light forms of industry, throughout the whole circle of trades suited to maimed and invalid men, there will still remain those whom the small support of a pension, eked out by home protection or local sympathy and co-operation, will not adequately care for. The large body of foreigners, the reckless and unrelated, those who have hitherto been afloat, with such as are most seriously disabled, or have least natural force to provide for themselves—these must be collected in National Institutions. We don't want a vast network of soldiers' poor-houses scattered through the land, in which these brave fellows

will languish away dull and wretched lives. Nor do we want petty State asylums, to be quarrelled about and made the subject of party politics. We want to economize our battered heroes, and take care of them in such a way as to maintain the military spirit and the national pride ; to nurse the memories of the war, and to keep in the eye of the Nation the price of its liberties. After reducing to the smallest number this class, to be kept in the hands of the State, how best to deal with it is the chief problem connected with this topic ; and the principal sources of light are first, general principles, and next, the experience of other nations—for we have had next to none in our own country.

Of the general principles, a few occur to me at once :

1. Justice and policy both demand that these Institutions should be National, and not State Institutions. A war against State pretensions should not end without strengthening in every way Federal influence. This war is a struggle for *National* existence. We have found a *National* heart, and life, and body. Now, let us cherish it. I know that desperate efforts will be made to build up State asylums for these invalids. Let us judiciously discourage the idea from the start.

2. The Institutions should honor both military and civil life. They should be military in their organization, control, dress, drill, and maintain the antecedents of the war from which they spring. The care of the trophies, arms, cannon, &c., might be assigned to them. They should be made nurseries of our military glory, and should, in some way, be skilfully co-ordinated with the popular heart, so as to feel, and to animate, the national sentiment. At the same time they should be industrial—encouraging and allowing such an amount and variety of labor as would discourage listlessness and monotony, and prevent the feeling of utter dependence.

How these institutions are to grow up, is doubtful; whether *by degrees, as a necessity*, or by bold legislation from the start.

We have thought, as a Commission, of asking the Government for the control and care of disabled soldiers from the time they leave the Hospital as patients, and begin their convalescence, to the period when they are finally discharged; say four months on the average; then, to create special Hospitals (with Government funds) for these convalescents, of a temporary character; to find out the homes, and favor the establishment in their own local communities of all able to be thus provided for; having an eye, through our village affiliated associations, to their well-being and future career, and aiding in every way the success of the just principles laid down in the earlier part of this letter.

Then, retaining, partly at our own expense, (that is, out of the spontaneous bestowments of the people,) all those disabled men who are the proper subjects for permanent asylums, finally to inaugurate a great asylum, with branches, partly under our own control and management, partly under that of the Government, which by degrees should embrace and embody every wise, humane, and patriotic idea suited to the case. Our dependence for success in such a scheme—very crude as yet—would be the possession of more and earlier thought, better and fuller information, a profounder and wiser plan—such a plan as would recommend itself—and which on statement would so engage the consent and affections of the people, as to secure its adoption by Congress.

If this matter be left to politicians, or be hurried through Congress by busy men, it will want all profound merits. It will be sure to violate our American principles, to wound political economy, and to botch the whole idea. If, on the other hand, we can slowly mature a wise, ripe plan, it may become a germ of the utmost beneficence to the soldiers and to the nation.

But why am I laying all this unasked, before you?

It is time I answered that question. I have long been acquainted with your familiarity with subjects of this nature, and the fitness of your mind to contemplate and digest them into form. I heard that you were just going abroad to spend some time. I was persuaded that you must carry with you the deepest solicitude for your country, and desire to serve it. Now, dear sir, there is a great opportunity to render the country, and the soldiers, a serious service. I have spoken of the light which the experience of foreign nations casts on this subject of invalid asylums. We are very anxious to have a careful report on the subject of the foreign institutions for the care of invalid soldiers, before the next meeting of Congress. And at the meeting of the Executive Committee of the Sanitary Commission recently held at my house, the following resolution was offered by Mr. Olmsted, and passed:

Resolved, That S. G. Perkins, Esq., be requested to study the military pension and invalid system of the principal European nations, visiting the more important establishments in which invalid soldiers are maintained, and to report his observations to the Commission, with the conclusions of his judgment in regard to an invalid and pension system for the disabled soldiers of the present war."

I hope you will consent to do this work for us. I know no man so well fitted, and I really think it can be laid upon you as a clear call of Divine Providence. Nothing was said on the subject of remuneration. We are all volunteers in this good work. But I think there is no doubt that any necessary expenses, incurred in this service, extra to your natural expenses, would be cheerfully reimbursed by this Commission; and, if this is a point of interest or importance, I will have action taken upon it at the earliest moment.

I have not felt at liberty to withhold this communication,

although, since the resolution was passed, instructing me to make it, so serious a calamity has fallen upon you. If the sympathy of numerous friends can alleviate your great trial, you will not want much consolation in so profound a sorrow.

I am, dear sir, very respectfully and cordially,

Yours,

HENRY W. BELLOWS,
President of the Sanitary Commission.